

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
TWELVTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST  
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON  
WHY AREN'T WE IN TROUBLE?  
LUKE 12:49-53  
August 15, 2010  
10:00 A.M. SERVICE**

It is nice to hear someone say about a young person that **“she is a good girl”** or **“he is a good boy.”** It is even better if we also hear that he or she **“has never been in trouble.”** But history reveals that people of character may find themselves in deep trouble when they challenge social prejudice, economic injustice, racial inequality, or gender bias.

Jesus pulled no punches in warning the disciples that their faith would cost them. It could separate them from loved ones, cause them physical persecution, rob them of peace of mind, and even cost them their lives.

Imagine, if you will, a conference of bishops. The presiding bishop says, **“We ask God for many things. Let us consider what the Lord Christ might ask us, were he physically present with us.”** One bishop said, **“I think Jesus would ask, ‘If you are my disciples, why have you not made more converts this year?’** Another said, **“I believe he would ask us, ‘If you are my disciples, why have you not collected more offerings this year?’”** There was a long silence, then the oldest bishop present said, **“I disagree. I think Jesus would ask us, ‘If you are my disciples, why aren’t you in trouble?’”**

The popular image of Jesus as a non-violent, turn-the-other-cheek, man of peace is misleading. It is true he was **“without sin”** and was thoroughly committed to the

will of God. It is true that he both preached and practiced love for God and love for the neighbor. It is also true that his was the purest of lives. But none of these extraordinary truths about him were enough to keep him out of trouble. After his initial season of popularity, trouble dogged Jesus every step of the way.

After his baptism he entered the wilderness to be tested. The devil was devious, appearing to be his friend while tempting him to betray his calling. He began his ministry of teaching and healing, and became something of a sensation throughout Galilee. As his popularity increased, the religious establishment in Jerusalem took notice. Many of the Jewish religious leaders were threatened by the people's response to Jesus. They increasingly sought to discredit him and finally conspired to have him killed. Meanwhile, the Roman officials in Palestine saw Jesus as a potential rabble-rouser who might rally the people to revolution. The Romans primary responsibility was to keep the peace by subduing all agitators. The people eventually turned on Jesus when they realized he was not a nationalist zealot, or a warrior king. This meant he was not the Messiah, but just another pretender. In the life of Jesus, trouble took no holidays.

Like his first disciples, we tend to hear the promises of Jesus more clearly than his warnings. We hear the promises of grace and peace. We hear the promises of strength for the pilgrim and rest for the weary. We hear the promises of hope and eternal life. The warnings are there, probably more of them than we realize, but they are much easier to ignore.

Jesus warned his disciples about dark days and deadly situations. He warned them to travel light and to be prepared for rejection. He warned them against being led astray. He prepared them for poverty, for persecution, and for the radical sacrifice of bearing their own crosses. And in today's lesson from Luke, he tells them that he has come to cast fire on the earth; that he has not come to bring peace but division; that he has come to separate family members from each other.

What is he talking about? Whatever happened to family values? What are we to make of such brutal language? One thing it does not mean is that we, as Jesus' disciples, are to become intentionally divisive or openly antagonistic. Jesus is preparing his disciples for the inevitable conflict between good and evil, light and darkness, truth and falsehood. Jesus is referring to the inevitable fork in the road, when some will feel constrained to take the challenging, inconvenient way and others will choose the smooth, inviting way. This requires no rejection of other people, nor does it justify superior or self-righteous attitudes. It is the joy and pain of having to choose, and of sometimes finding ourselves in a bit of trouble even with people we love.

The church's greatest danger has always been that it would make its home in the world. Followers of Jesus Christ are called to be in the world, but not of the world. This requires us to be “**resident aliens**” in the world, as the New Testament clearly sees and says. A part of our calling as Christians is to reside fully in the world, adapting as best we can to our given or chosen culture and environment. But we can never give the world the status of “**home**,” because of both its impermanence and its fallenness. Missionaries must adapt to their mission fields, immersing themselves in the history, language, culture, and politics of the people to whom they minister. Yet they must keep in mind that the Christian faith transcends all nations and cultures.

In much the same way, all Christians must distinguish as best they can between their faith and their culture. This is important because it is so easy for a culture and a religion to cross-pollinate values until it is difficult to determine where one ends and the other begins. For example, some worship styles in the United States are heavily influenced by the surrounding culture. Of course, it is well worth nothing that religious expressions have never been absolutely free from secular influences. Church and culture inevitably influence each other. The Christian community must be aware of this and stay vigilant in guarding against inappropriate influence from the outside. H. Richard Niebuhr's classic work, ***Christ and Culture***, concludes that, of the different ways Christ and culture may be related, the appropriate

Christian perspective is that of Christ *transforming* culture.

When a culture becomes an enemy of Christ, Christians cannot be silent. When human freedoms, civil rights, and the common good are jeopardized by those in power, Christ's people must take sides with the oppressed against the oppressors. Non-violent reactions, and a Christ-like spirit, should govern our reactions. But we should not expect the world to bless or befriend us. The more closely we follow Christ, the more likely we are to get in trouble.

History's heroes were troublemakers. George Washington challenged the power and pride of the British Empire and risked the future of America. Abraham Lincoln waged a civil war to save the union of North and South. Susan B. Anthony launched the women's rights movement against overwhelming odds. Martin Luther King, Jr. divided the nation, its states, and its families over racial segregation. The commitment to freedom and equal rights put all of them in grave danger.

While the pilgrimage of faith is not without times of trouble, we do not have to face these difficulties in our own strength alone. We are promised resources to help us meet the challenges of life. If you are one who depends upon God's help in times of trial, and perhaps get in trouble because of it, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.